

# On Top.

By Charles Frederic Goss.

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THE Jenkinses' donkey was as well known in Charlottesville as the schoolteacher, minister or doctor. For twenty years or more it had hauled the family and the family produce in and out of town. There were many who could remember it when young and dapper, but the passing years had altered its age, appearance and disposition very much in deed. When left in front of the store he did not need to be tied and afforded an effective illustration of the principle of inertia to the master of the village school.

"When a moving body comes to rest," he would say to pupils of the class it



DAN REPLACED THE BARS AND WENT AWAY.

physics, "it remains as inert as the Jenkinses' donkey until some extraneous impulse starts it up again."

The Jenkinses had prospered, owing all agreed, quite as much to the capabilities of Jehu as to any other member of the family, and they now possessed a team of horses that could travel faster and farther than the patient ass and carry twenty times as much. What to do with this superannuated supernumerary had become the greatest problem of the household, and the hired man, who had just come in from the barn with a couple of Jehu's heel marks upon his person, angrily proposed that the "doggone beast be shot!"

"Shot!" cried the sharp voice of Mrs. Jenkins as if a pistol had suddenly gone off. "I'd like to see it tried!"

"Oo soot my Zehoo, and I soot oo!" exclaimed little Bobby, who loved the donkey as he loved his life.

"Poor old Jehu! He's seen his best days! We'll have to get rid of him somehow," Mr. Jenkins said, taking Bobby in his arms and gazing at the once active and useful donkey, who had now laid his chin across a pair of bars and was gazing retrospectively into the distance.

"And so have some of the rest of us, but it doesn't follow that we have to be shot, does it?" Mrs. Jenkins asked, looking savagely at the back of the hired man, who was limping up and down the room.

"Fodder's scarce," suggested Tom, the oldest son, a thrifty fellow who was working his father's farm on shares.

"And you can bet your sweet life that old Jehu hasn't lost his appetite with his teeth," laughed Dan, the second son, a whimsical, happy-go-lucky youngster of sixteen, who saw the funny side of everything.

"It's a shame to talk so slightly about our dear and faithful friend!" exclaimed the daughter Susie, whose gentle voice was always lifted in behalf of weakness or of suffering.

"But he hasn't done a lick of work for six months, and he's got the heaves so that you can hear him breathe a mile away! He keeps me awake nights! I'm for selling him to a peddler!" Dan replied, seizing this promising opportunity to tease his sister, whom he secretly adored.

"I consider that the height of ingratitude!" Susie answered, looking reproachfully at her brother.

"Nevertheless, old Jehu is a problem," Father Jenkins said.

"Not as long as there is grass in the meadow or fodder in the stall!" his wife declared in a tone of voice that invariably terminated family disputes and now led her husband to reply:

"All right, Emily! If you say keep him, keep him it is! I reckon he won't live long anyway!"

"No! He'll go off in one of his coughing spells or choke on a cornstalk, poor old honker!" Dan declared gayly, as if announcing the most cheerful event in the world, but started down the path to the bars and patted the nose of the ass.

With the cantankerousness of old age, Jehu snapped at the caressing hand, and with the swift impulsive-

ness of youth Dan slapped him on the jaw.

"Take care!" called his father's admonishing voice.

"It's the only language he hasn't forgotten!" Dan rejoined.

At this moment the bell on the top of a tall pole by the kitchen door began to ring. The "hands" came hurrying from the barn, and the family assembled round the table, loaded with good things. The serious business of satisfying the clamorous demands of nature put the thought of Jehu out of every mind, but at the conclusion of the meal Dan led the limping donkey down the long lane to the pasture between fences over the rails of which the woodbine was clambering and in whose corner the sumac with its red blossoms and the elderberries with their purple fruit were standing thick.

Letting down the bars, he stuck his thumb into the lean ribs of the donkey and when that resentful creature reared and kicked chuckled with a boundless joy.

"You're spizzerinkum hasn't all burned up yet, eh, old man?" he said. Jehu did not reply, but stood with his back turned until Dan replaced the bars and went away, when he laid his chin upon the topmost rail and watched his youthful master with a meditative eye. What his reflections were a man may only guess; but, judging from the expression of his countenance, they were a gloomy mixture of skepticism, cynicism and despair of life. After he had ruminated for a long time upon the mysteries of existence Jehu turned away to break his fast. The weather had been moist, and the grass in the meadow was succulent. Into its cool sweetness he dug his aged nozzle and chewed the few shreds which his worn and widely scattered teeth could tear away, with wild regrets for vanished youth. After he had satisfied his appetite he looked about. A flock of sheep were pastured in the field. Some of them were lying down, blinking at the sun and reflectively chewing the cud. Sidling up to these, one after another, he poked his nose into their ribs and roused them up. Was it a spirit of innocent mischief like Dan's that made him do it or envy of their happiness or restlessness of heart? And why was it that he crept quietly behind a young colt and kicked him in the thigh, lifting up his raucous voice in a loud, triumphant honk as the frightened filly squealed and started down the pasture on a run? Of all the inarticulate and untranslatable sounds of nature that honk was the most startling and mysterious! What was its true significance? An outpouring of joy, sorrow, anger or despair?

Amid the traditions floating around the school yard there was one about old Jehu's honk. The teacher had been accustomed to dismiss the school at the sound of a steam whistle which always blew at noon. One day it blew too soon, she thought, but closed the recitation, opened the door and let out the eager throng of little people, only to learn that it was the voice of Jehu she had heard!

More than once during the morning Jehu lifted up his deep, incomprehensible and far-reaching voice, but had the Jenkins family not been completely absorbed in their tasks they would have noticed that in the afternoon it suddenly assumed a different tone. Not only did it become more frequent, more insistent and more remote, but had a plaintive and a pleading quality that had never been heard in it before. And, worse than this, it finally had ceased to sound at all!

But in the multitude of sounds that fell upon the family ears from roosters, cattle, sheep and farm machines Jehu's voice was mingled and lost. When it ceased, it was not missed. No one had bestowed a thought upon the old gray donkey until Susie and little Bob went hand in hand down the long lane to drive the cattle home.

"Where's my Zehoo?" asked the child, whose sharp eyes detected his absence from the crowd of living things about the bars.

Casting her eye over the pasture, Susie saw that he was gone. Inexplicable as this seemed at first, she quickly found the reason why. Just inside the bars there was an old well which had mysteriously gone dry and been covered up by heavy planks. With a start of terror, she observed that this covering had been broken through and that in the splinters of the boards were long tufts of Jehu's almost snow white hair.

"Help, help!" she screamed, putting her pretty hands to her lips and shouting to her brothers in a neighboring field.

"What's the matter?" they inquired, throwing down their hoes and starting on a run.

"Jehu's fallen in the well! Quick! Quick!" she cried. In a few moments the news had traveled all around the farm, and the different members of the family came running from the fields, the barn, the house, to find Susie wringing her hands in helpless grief and little Bobbie howling through his tears, "My Zehoo's fallen—in—ze—well; ze—naughty—ole—well!"

It is one thing to discuss the problem of what to do with an old and faithful servant like the donkey when he is alive, and it is quite another to stand by a deep well into which he has fallen and where he may be suffering agonies from broken bones.

"Ere's a pretty 'ow-de-do!" piteously exclaimed the kind-hearted Yorkshirer, who that very morning had proposed to shoot him in cold blood.

"Who knows how much you are to blame—yourself!" exclaimed the implacable Mrs. Jenkins, wiping her blue eyes with a checked apron whose color matched them to a shade.

"Do you think he's dead?" asked

Dan in a ghastly whisper, remembering with remorse that his last act had been one of disrespect, if not unkindness.

"As a doornail!" Tom sententiously replied.

"How deep's the well?" the mother asked.

Some thought it ten and others twenty feet, but all agreed that at Jehu's advanced age even a donkey could not possibly survive so hard a fall. Unquestionably the faithful ass was dead.

"Strange solution of the problem what to do with Jehu, isn't it?" Mr. Jenkins asked in a voice whose tone of too affected grief led Mrs. Jenkins to remark:

"I do believe you're glad he's dead!"

"Oh, no, my dear!" he said, resenting her reproach with a quite sincere anger. "I'm not exactly glad he's dead; but, then, you know, he had to die some time and in some way, and I reckon he found this one 'bout as satisfactory as any. He's been a good mule, and I'm as sorry as anybody, only I'm honest enough to say that he's been saved a lot of suffering, and we've been saved a lot of trouble!"

"Better not preach his funeral sermon till you really know he's dead! Remember 'bout that editorial on Judge Hancock, don't you?" observed the irrepressible Daniel, referring to a newspaper eulogy on the character of a distinguished citizen who had insisted upon defeating the prognostications of the whole medical fraternity and surviving to read his own obituary.

"Oh, he's dead all right," Tom asserted, "or you'd hear him honk or kick or heave. Listen! There isn't any sound, you see. Old Jehu's done for. Better bury him right where he is, hadn't we, father? It's not often that any one so accommodatingly dies in his own grave."

"Yes, if you're sure. I wouldn't like to bury him alive," the farmer answered and kicked a little loose earth into the well, adding after listening a minute: "That settles it! Better get some shovels and begin."

The time consumed by the hired men in going to the barn for tools was profitably employed in eulogies upon the character and accomplishments of the dead donkey, and never were there more kind and complimentary tributes paid to the worth of any creature down below the scale of human life. And yet it must be said that there was still in every breast but Bobbie's that pitiless joy that wells up from living bosoms over open graves. Who ever died, man or beast, but the gaping crowd consoling its sorrows, some with the reflection that they would now be relieved from a heavy burden of care, some that there would be more standing room on earth, some that they could now wear the abandoned shoes and some that they could spend the substance of the dead? But these are feelings which we try to cover up from our own eyes as well as those of others, and Mrs. Jenkins, who could not perfectly succeed in doing so, was quite as much relieved as all the rest when the men came back with the tools and the rough interment was begun.

How thoughtful the good old donkey seemed to every one! If he had deliberately planned to save them trouble, he could not have arranged the circumstances of his death more conveniently. When the well was dug the earth had not been carried off and now lay a collar round its mouth. The sections simply had to push it back.

It was not a very deep well either and would require so little time for filling that everybody lingered to see the last of the obsequies of the poor old ass. The men were strong and spelled each other at the work. Shovel after shovel of earth tumbled into the gaping hole with a dull thud. From the sound of the falling clods it was evident that the grave was nearly filled. Mrs. Jenkins and Susie were turning sadly away when suddenly an

old man do—up—up stepping stones of their dead selves to higher things! For an instant quite a solemn silence brooded over the scene, and then young Daniel voiced a universal thought. "By Jinks," he said, "it's hard to keep a good man down!"

In the single eye of the old jackass, who gazed about that circle of mourners whose sorrow had been turned less into joy than amazement, there was a triumphant and some thought a malevolent look which seemed to say plainly or than words, "On top again!"

"BETTER GET SOME SHOVELS AND BEGIN" exclamation of astonishment burst from the lips of the workmen. They turned and with unbelieving eyes beheld old Jehu rising plainly into view, stamping the falling earth with his hoofs and making a solid platform upon which he steadily rose in something of the way the poet says that good



"Do you think he's dead?" asked

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men do—up—up stepping stones of their dead selves to higher things!

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